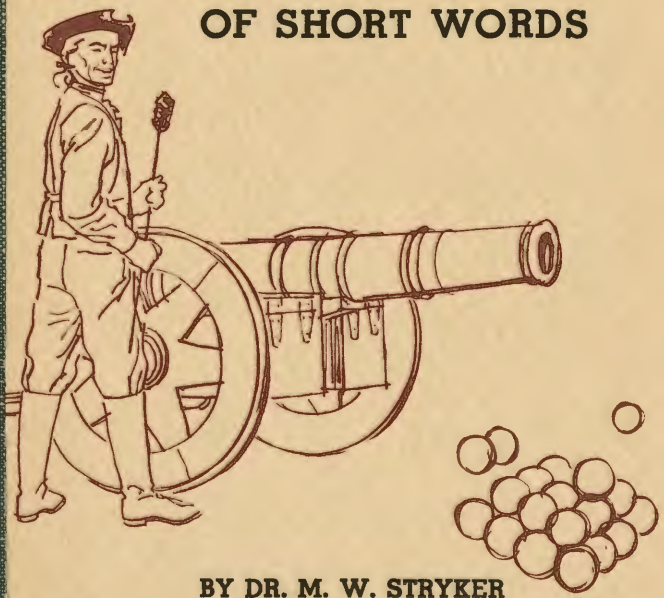
Alumni
Collection
5958

THE STRENGTH OF SHORT WORDS



BY DR. M. W. STRYKER

The Strength of Short Words

Reprinted from the Hamilton Literary Magazine, Hamilton College, Clinton, New York 1911.

The late Dr. Melancthon Woolsley Stryker was President of Hamilton College from 1892 to 1917.

There are few things that go so far to make style crisp and firm as the apt use of brief words.

They stab the core. As once with their short swords the men of Rome stood close to their foes, so it is with the stroke of quick speech, sharp of blade and sure of hilt, that keen wit wins its case, its cause, or its day. It is when we put our plain old tongue to the test of this use that we touch its strengths and find what wealth it has in least room.

The thought that has great worth does not need to be set forth by the stress of lungs. The lie may storm and rage and

"crack its cheeks," but truth has its way with a still small voice.

Long words are too much a veil for dull thoughts.

When one feels deep and breathes fast, his speech leaps and runs; it is the soul, not rapt or full, that weaves fine phrase and spins the web and lace of thin and weak style.

That short words tire us is in this, that they force one to think fast to keep up with them. They go and they march. But in long words one can guess the far end and

rest while it comes on. The thought that throbs and burns in the heart hurls out hot speech, and does not pause to seek the grace of mere sound, which but woos the ear with guile.

In that they are bold such terms take the minds of men by storm. Like the ink which some fish spread to hide their flight, so long drawn words let lies go free. The wit of each age does in some way show its wise self in small room, not hard to bear nor a care to keep. The first page of the Book of John shows one what great and broad things can be set forth in short space.

He who rides may wield a lance, but when he comes to his own two feet and no more, when death peers at him and draws close, then must he ply his dirk and strike fast and sure.

A guild which would turn men to put down the great waste of good breath would help our time. If we read God's book more we should come to know that great themes do not force the long phrase. Men of sense can see that bulk is not worth. Short words for long heads. Lithe tongues to feast long ears. No style was writ in all his time or ours more sure and tense than that which, at one place in words that pant and glow, sets forth the lone man down, and well nigh done, while the ill fiend looms close and with a stride quite the whole breadth of the way spits forth his foul hate and stout boast —"Here will I spill thy soul." Our age needs

some great books made in small words. Ten times ten score words will go far to fill his scrip who knows how to make each smooth stone from the brook find its mark and strike the brain.